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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA AND NEA/IPA

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SUBJECT: JORDAN FEARS IT WILL BEAR BURDEN OF FAILURE (OR SUCCESS) OF PEACE TALKS

REF: A. AMMAN 2673

1B. AMMAN 2647

1C. AMMAN 2424

Classified By: AMBASSADOR R. STEPHEN BEECROFT
FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (S) Summary and Comment: With some frequency over the past several months the local commentariat has expressed anxiety that Jordan risks becoming the alternative Palestinian homeland, given Palestinian disunity and perceived Israeli and U.S. duplicity. Officials have publicly reaffirmed their opposition to anything of the sort - couching their denials in terms of solidarity with the Palestinian quest for independence and defending the right of return of refugees. Yet even as Jordan maintains its moderate, pro-two state solution posture, the government is clearly unnerved by the unhealed Palestinian rifts and by the lack of progress toward peace, and wants to be prepared for any eventuality. The King and others have privately voiced doubts that PA President Mahmoud Abbas can keep his grip on power. Meanwhile, Jordan's renewed contacts with the once-shunned Hamas suggest to many that Jordan is hedging its bets that the moderate Palestinian leadership can oversee the creation of a viable Palestinian state and shoring up relations with a group that vocally opposes any compromise on right of return or Jordanian rule over the West Bank (Ref C).
End Summary and Comment.

Mainly A Media Furor, But Government Takes Note

12. (SBU) The media hubbub was initially stoked by false reports last spring that U.S. scholar Robert Kagan, billed as an adviser to Senator John McCain, had said the presidential candidate viewed Jordan as the natural home for millions of its Palestinian inhabitants. Emblematic was Nayef Al-Qadi's late June column in the Arab nationalist Al-Arab Al-Yawm asserting that "we in Jordan are always bracing ourselves for more pressures, risks and schemes, and this is one of them, and no one can be quiet about it even if it was a lie!" The coverage of this story even bled into the chorus of criticism that led to the October resignation of former Chief of the Royal Court Bassem Awadallah (of Palestinian origin). He was accused of conspiring to support a peace process outcome unfavorable to East Bank Jordanians (Ref A). Further stoking the flames was Abbas' September interview with an Israeli daily, in which the PA leader expressed understanding that "if we demand that all five million return, the state of Israel will be destroyed," and suggested a much more modest number would be appropriate.

13. (C) Among those fearing a conspiracy, there appear to be two basic paths toward Jordan becoming the alternative Palestinian homeland. The first path is a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians that negates the "right of return" of Palestinians living in Jordan, thereby codifying the demographic imbalance to the detriment of "pure" Jordanians. (Note: this is a soft-boiled version of the

traditional "Jordan is Palestine" concept originating in the 1970s with Ariel Sharon, who advocated the replacement of "the artificial kingdom" with a Palestinian state. End Note.) The second path involves the collapse of the peace process and chaos in the West Bank forcing Jordan into taking responsibility for that territory and its people - a contemporary version of the "Jordan Option" of Hashemite rule over Palestinians (which would also have worrisome demographic consequences from an East Banker perspective).

¶4. (C) Government officials have publicly denied there has been consideration of any such an alternative and reiterated their steadfast support of the right of return and of Jordanian integrity. Omar Nahar, Director of Policy Planning and Research at the MFA, told us that whatever the concerns in the press, there is no real worry in official circles that Jordan will become an alternative homeland for the Palestinians because Jordan "simply will never let it happen." Yasar Qatarneh of the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy observed that nationalists are loath to absorb more Palestinians who will inevitably compete for rights and primacy; Islamists and Arabists see it as selling out the Palestinian cause; and the security/intelligence establishment fears a face-off with Palestinians as soon as the inevitable controversial development occurs in the West Bank.

¶5. (C) Our contacts have mainly blamed the stalled peace process for the issue's renewed salience, but they have also cited undertones of East Banker distrust of Palestinians. Former Jordanian MP and columnist Hamadeh Faraneh - widely viewed as close to Fatah - told PolOff the fear is that the

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only remaining solution will be for Jordan to take an increasing role in the West Bank, and that ultimately Jordan will find itself overwhelmed by an even greater Palestinian majority. Similarly, Palestine National Council Chairman Salim Zanoun told PolOff on September 28 that Israeli policies, despite continued talks with the Palestinians, were designed to create such bad conditions on the ground that Palestinians - if they had a choice - would want to go to Jordan. He noted that Israel appears more the superpower than the United States as settlements continue to expand in the West Bank despite UN resolutions, the Oslo Accords, the Roadmap, the Annapolis process, and numerous visits to the region by U.S. officials.

"The Neo-Jordan Option"?

¶6. (C) Contacts suggest that of perhaps greater concern than having the refugee question settled without "return" (read: Palestinians departing Jordan), is the possibility that Jordan will find itself saddled with responsibility for the Palestinians in the West Bank as well. Qatarneh spoke to PolOff of "The 'Neo'-Jordan Option," in which Jordan is forced to reassert authority in the West Bank, two decades after King Hussein dropped his claims to it and severed legal and administrative ties. Mohammad Al-Momani, a political science professor who hosts a weekly talk show addressing political issues of the day speculated to us in mid-October that 1-2 million Palestinians would leave Jordan in fulfillment of the right of return (Note: The majority of our Palestinian-origin contacts would strongly disagree, pointing out that most are focused on obtaining their rights here, even as they cling to the principle and rhetoric of return. Our contacts tend to be skewed toward the middle- and upper-class, however, so they may not fully reflect Palestinian-origin opinion in Jordan. End Note). Momani added that that the fear is that if Jordan assumes a greater role in the West Bank, the Palestinians there will become Jordanian and create "a serious demographic shift."

¶7. (C) Nawaf Tel, Director of the Center for Strategic Studies and a Foreign Ministry adviser, saw things moving in this direction. Israeli statements and actions are

worrisome, he said, noting that at several international conferences he had attended recently, noteworthy Israeli figures have raised the idea, including a former Israeli Ambassador to Jordan. "These are not wacko right-wingers," he observed, "they are mainstream." He detected signs that Israel may be trying to establish borders unilaterally - citing a cabinet debate about compensation for settlers if they withdrew from certain areas. "It's only fair to assume the West Bank will be shoved down our throats," he concluded.

¶8. (S) Tel's cynicism may sound overwrought, but senior government officials also have voiced their concerns to us that Israel is now questioning the desirability of a two-state solution. GID Director Dahabi has been most explicit in private, theorizing that Israel's goal is for the peace process to fail, to annex those parts of the West Bank that it wants, and to leave Jordan holding the bag. He also raises doubts about Abbas' continued leadership (even as he insists Jordan backs the PA President to the hilt). The King, too, has expressed worries about Abu Mazen's future and at times questions Israel's commitment to peace talks. The GOJ wants to make clear this is an unacceptable outcome. In conversations with Special Envoy for Middle East Regional Security General James Jones (Ret.) in September, the King, GID's Dahabi and then-Royal Court Chief Awadallah all took pains to reiterate their opposition to Jordanian forces taking a direct role in the areas governed by the PA either now or as part of a future solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Ref B).

Renewed Jordan-Hamas Ties: Another Piece in the Puzzle?

¶9. (SBU) Another story that has captured the public's attention is the renewal of ties between Jordan and Hamas, a group that was expelled from Jordan in 1999, and with which Jordan cut off most ties following indications that the group had been stockpiling weapons on Jordanian soil. Some in the press have drawn a straight line between this development and fears that the Kingdom could become the alternative homeland as Hamas is a stalwart opponent of the idea and demands a fully-realized right of return. Jordanian columnist Fahed Al-Khitani told Al-Jazeera in late October that a "tactical alliance" was being formed in part to stand against any future settlement of the Palestinian issue at Jordan's expense.

¶10. (U) Indeed, Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mish'al told Al-Arab Al-Yawm in early November that, faced with an

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unpredictable situation, Jordanian decision-makers were forced to consider alternative means and options, including Hamas. "With regard to Jordan, specifically," he said, "Hamas' position is clear ... the movement is against resettling refugees, be that in Jordan or in any other country. Hamas is also against the concept of an alternative homeland and against the concept of compensating for the failure of Palestinian-Israeli settlements by forming a Palestinian state through an alternative (state) somewhere else."

¶11. (S) Comment: An uncertain geopolitical map - which faces the U.S. presidential transition, an approaching election in Israel, internal Palestinian divisions, concerns about Iraq's long-term stability, Iranian influence, etc. - has again stirred up questions about the future of the Palestinian question as relates to Jordan. Some pundits here cite the GID-Hamas contacts as evidence that the GOJ is jumping the Fatah ship in favor of Hamas, partly because of Fatah's weakness, and partly because neither Abbas nor his party are seen as having Jordan's interests at heart. This perception probably overstates GOJ concerns, but it is worth noting that GID's Dahabi - a key adviser to the King - has not been shy about wondering aloud to us whether Jordan "backed the wrong horse" in Abbas, a man he has described as "like expired food." When asked whether by engaging with Hamas, Jordan is

undermining Abbas, official interlocutors simply point out that Israel and Egypt are meeting with Hamas, that Syria and Iran are actively engaged with Hamas, and that Jordan cannot afford to be disengaged. End Comment.

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